

A History of Indian Buddhism: From Sakyamuni to Early Mahayana.

By Hirakawa Akira, Translated by Paul Groner

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CHAPTER 4

The Organization of the Order

The Ideal of the Buddhist Order

THE BUDDHIST ORDER is called “*saṅgha*” in Sanskrit. In Buddhist texts, it is often referred to as the “harmonious order” (*samagra-saṅgha*) to indicate that it is organized to promote peace and harmony among its members.¹ The religious goal of individual Buddhists is to realize enlightenment and to live a life that is in agreement with and contributes to their religious objectives. Such individuals should be able to assemble and live together peacefully and harmoniously. When unenlightened people are members of the *saṅgha*, they are expected to strive to maintain peace in the order while each person strives to realize enlightenment for himself. The individual’s efforts to live in peace and harmony with his fellow practitioners should be in complete agreement with his efforts to realize his spiritual goals.

The Buddha was revered as the root of the Dharma, the eye of the Dharma, and the embodiment of the Dharma. His disciples placed their complete faith in him by paying homage to him as a great teacher (*śāstrī*); they always followed his instructions. Consequently, they were called “hearers” (*śrāvaka*; P. *sāvaka*). The Buddha exhibited impressive tranquility, which arose out of his deep meditation, instilling those who met him with a deep sense of calm. Moreover, because of the Buddha’s vast wisdom, insight, and all-encompassing compassion, his disciples trusted and followed him without hesitation. Although they had various abilities and personalities, many were able to realize the goals of their

religious practices. Teacher and student shared in a similar enlightenment experience and belonged to the same order (*saṅgha*).

The nature of the *saṅgha* was frequently compared to the ocean with the following eight analogies: (1) just as the ocean becomes gradually deeper, so does study in the order gradually progress; (2) just as the waters of the ocean never exceed its shores, so do the Buddha's disciples never break the precepts; (3) just as the ocean never keeps a body and always casts it back on shore, so does the order always charge those who violate the precepts with their offenses; (4) just as various rivers flow into the ocean and lose their names, so do those who enter the order abandon their social classes and lay names to be called only "disciples of the Buddha" or "monks"; (5) just as a salty taste is diffused throughout the ocean, so is the "taste" of salvation diffused throughout the order; (6) just as the ocean does not increase or decrease no matter how many rivers flow into it, so does the order not increase or decrease no matter how many of its members enter *nirvāṇa*; (7) just as a variety of treasures is hidden in the ocean, so are profound teachings and precepts found in the order; (8) just as great fish live in the ocean, so do illustrious disciples of the Buddha live in the order. These eight comparisons were called the eight wonderful qualities (*aṣṭa adbhuta-dharma*) of the order and were used to explain its unique character.

The Four Groups

The Buddha's disciples were divided into two types: lay believers and mendicants. A layman was called an *upāsaka*, and a laywoman was called an *upāsikā*. The term "*upāsaka*" refers to one who waits upon or serves (another person). Thus an *upāsaka* served mendicants by supplying the items, such as food and robes, that they required for their religious lives. The mendicants instructed the lay believers about how to practice Buddhism while living as lay devotees. A lay person became an *upāsaka* by placing his faith in the Three Jewels. Those who were particularly zealous also observed the five precepts for laymen and laywomen.

A male Buddhist mendicant was called a monk (*bhikṣu*), and a female Buddhist mendicant was called a nun (*bhikṣuṇī*). The term "*bhikṣu*" refers to a man who begs. Thus the *bhikṣu* devoted himself to performing religious austerities while living by means of the requisites given him by lay believers. Once a person became a monk by receiving the full ordination (*upasampadā*), his life was strictly regulated by the approximately

250 precepts for monks. The four groups (*catus parīṣad*) of Buddhists were the monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen.

The Buddhist Order (*Saṅgha*)

During the time of the Buddha, political groups and trade guilds were called *saṅgha*. The term was also applied to religious orders, and thus the Buddhist order was called a *saṅgha*. (The term “*gaṇa*” [group] was sometimes used to refer to religious orders, particularly for Mahāyāna orders, which were sometimes called *bodhisattva-gaṇa*.²)

In its very broadest sense the term “*saṅgha*” might be used to refer to all four groups of Buddhists; however, when it was used in early Buddhist texts, it usually indicated only the two orders of mendicants. When the monks assembled they were called the order of monks (*bhikṣu-saṅgha*); the nuns were called the order of nuns (*bhikṣuṇī-saṅgha*). Both orders together were usually referred to as “The Two Orders.” The orders were largely independent of each other and autonomous, with each responsible for maintaining its own monastic discipline. The four groups of Buddhists were not referred to collectively as a single order (*saṅgha*).

Only individuals over twenty years old could receive the full ordination and thus become monks or nuns. Those who were not yet twenty could be initiated (*pravrajyā*), receive the ten precepts, and enter the order as male (*śrāmaṇera*) or female novices (*śrāmaṇerī*). Usually the minimum age for novices was fourteen, but in special cases it might be lowered to seven. Such young novices were called “crow-chasers” (*kākuṭṭhe-paka*).

When a female novice became eighteen, she would undergo a ceremony qualifying her to be a “probationary nun” (*śikṣamāṇā*). For two years she would observe six rules. When she had completed this training, she could become a nun. Monks, nuns, probationary nuns, male novices, and female novices are often grouped together in Buddhist texts and called the “five groups of mendicants.” When laymen and laywomen were added to these five, the entire set was referred to as “the seven groups.”

Lay Buddhists were expected to observe five precepts: abstention from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicants. In addition, on the six *uposatha* days each month (the eighth, fourteenth, fifteenth, twenty-third, twenty-ninth, and thirtieth), they were also to abstain from eating after midday, witnessing displays of music and dance, and using perfumes and garlands, making a total of eight pre-

cepts observed. Observance of these precepts was not compulsory. If a lay person violated a precept, no penalty was imposed. In contrast, the five groups of mendicants were required to observe the precepts to maintain discipline in the order. Set penalties were imposed on those mendicants who violated the precepts.

A person was expected to observe the moral precepts (*śīla*) of his own accord, simply because he had resolved to follow Buddhist practices. Since the precepts differed for the various groups of Buddhists, when the precepts were conferred, the recipient had to choose whether he would live and practice as a lay devotee or a member of a monastic order. The precepts served as the foundation for a person's religious practices. For a monk or nun, observance of the precepts was compulsory, since these rules regulated the organization, communal life, and discipline of the order. The rules or precepts of the *saṅgha*, of which there were approximately 250 for monks, were called the *vinaya*. The most serious class of precepts was called the *pārājika*; commission of a *pārājika* offense was punished by permanent expulsion from the order. In addition, a monk could be temporarily suspended from the order for the violation of any of thirteen *saṅghādisēsa* precepts. Even though morality was primarily based on the individual's self-control, the rules of the *vinaya* served as controls imposed by the order.

A distinction between two basic types of *saṅgha* is made in Buddhist texts. The first type, the "present order" (*saṃmukhībhūta-saṅgha*), refers to an order that exists in a particular place and time. When four or more monks assemble and form an order, it is a present order. This type of order has certain geographical boundaries (*sīmā*). Any monk within those boundaries is required to attend all meetings that are held. The procedures for conducting such meetings are called *karman*, and the person who conducts the meetings is called the master of ceremonies (*karma-ācārya*).

Everyone was required to be present or accounted for at meetings. Full attendance was particularly important at fortnightly *uposatha* assemblies (held on the fifteenth and thirtieth days of the month) as well as at the rainy season retreats, since important monastic business such as the selection of officials of the order was carried out at these meetings. In most cases, a minimum of four monks was required to vote on monastic business. However, certain *karman* (procedures or ceremonies) required more monks. At least five monks were required to hold the *pravāraṇa* ceremony, held at the end of the three-month rainy season retreat to mark the dissolution of the order that had observed the retreat together. During the ceremony, monks pointed out any errors or questionable behavior they had observed in each other during the retreat

and then confessed their faults to each other. Since a sufficient number of monks to constitute an order had to be present to hear the confession of a monk, at least five monks were required for the *pravāraṇa*. To perform a full ordination and confer the status of monkhood on a candidate required ten monks: a preceptor who sponsored the candidate, a master of ceremonies who conducted the ordination, a teacher who instructed the candidate about the precepts and questioned him about his eligibility to enter the order, and seven witnesses. In outlying areas where ten monks could not be assembled without great difficulty, however, a full ordination could be conducted by five monks (preceptor, master of ceremonies, teacher, and two witnesses). A minimum of twenty monks was required to readmit a suspended monk (who had been charged with any of the thirteen *saṅghādiṣeṣa* offenses) into the order.

In a large monastery, conducting monastic business could require so much time that it might infringe upon a person's religious practice. Consequently, a special order of only ten or twenty monks might be established within a small area in or near the monastery primarily for the purpose of ordaining monks or lifting suspensions. Eventually, the area designated as the meeting place of this special order was called the "precepts platform" or *śīmāmaṇḍala*.

The present order was an autonomous unit. It governed itself in accordance with the *vinaya* and conducted its own fortnightly assemblies and rainy season retreats. It administered the order's assets, such as the buildings and grounds of the monastery, and ensured that they were used in a fair manner. In addition, the order distributed equal shares of the food and clothing it received as alms to the monks to help them lead religious lives.

A present order was governed by the precepts of the *vinaya*, but did not have the right to alter those precepts. The *vinaya* transcended the rights and interests of any single order. Moreover, although a present order had the right to use the monastery and its buildings, it did not have the right to sell them. To explain this situation, the existence of a higher level of the *saṅgha* was posited. It was called "the order of the four quarters" or the "universal order" (*cāturdisa-saṅgha*) and consisted of all the disciples of the Buddha. It transcended time and place and included the monks of the past, present, and future; it encompassed all geographical areas; it continued forever. Monasteries and other buildings all belonged to the order of the four quarters; it was represented by the set of precepts that governed all of the present orders.

Orders of nuns were organized in basically the same way as orders of monks. However, the nuns received instruction in Buddhist teachings and precepts from the monks. To ensure that monks and nuns remained

chaste and above suspicion, contact between the two groups was strictly regulated by a set of eight major or weighty rules (*gurudharma*).³

Prātimokṣa

The rules followed by monks or nuns are collected in a genre of literature called the *prātimokṣasūtra*. There are approximately 250 precepts for monks and 350 for nuns. The *prātimokṣasūtra* does not include directions for conducting the assemblies and performing the ceremonies that regulate the *saṅgha*. The disciplinary rules for monks are divided into eight classes, and those for nuns into seven. The most important class consists of the four *pārājika* rules for monks (eight for nuns): abstention from sexual intercourse, stealing, taking human life, and lying about one's spiritual achievements. Committing any of these acts entails permanent, lifelong expulsion from the order.

The thirteen *saṅghādisēṣa* rules for monks are second to the *pārājika* in importance. (Lists of seventeen and nineteen rules are found in the *vinayas* for nuns.) Included are rules concerning sexual offenses, false accusations against another monk or nun of committing a *pārājika* offense, and attempts to cause schisms in the order. If a person commits any of these acts, he must go before the assembled *saṅgha* and confess his wrongdoing. Then for seven days he must live apart from the order and do penance (*mānatva*). Following this, the order may meet and readmit him if they are satisfied with his penance. A person who unsuccessfully attempts a *pārājika* or *saṅghādisēṣa* offense is charged with an attempted (*sthūlātyaya*) offense.

The third class of precepts consists of two rules concerning offenses of undetermined (*aniyata*) gravity. Both concern the activities of monks found with women. The gravity of the offense is determined in accordance with the testimony of witnesses. This class is found only in the precepts for monks.

The fourth class of precepts consists of thirty *naiḥsargika-prāyaścittika* rules for monks. Nuns also observe thirty rules. These concern possessions. For example, a monk may possess only one set of three robes. Any additional robes may be kept only temporarily. Similar restrictions apply to the cloth upon which he sits, special robes for the rainy weather, begging bowls, and medicine. In addition, monks and nuns may not possess gold, silver, or jewels. If these rules are violated, the person must surrender the items in question and confess his or her wrongdoing.

The fifth class of precepts consists of the *pāṭayantika* rules. These num-

ber 90 or 92 for monks, depending on which *vinaya* is consulted, and between 141 and 201 for nuns. These rules concern minor offenses such as speaking harshly and lying. Committing such offenses requires confession.

The sixth class consists of the *pratideśanīya* rules. These minor rules, four for monks and eight for nuns, concern the acceptance and consumption of inappropriate food.

The seventh class, the *śaikṣa*, consists of 75 or 107 rules, depending on which *vinaya* is consulted. The number of regulations is the same for monks as for nuns. These rules concern etiquette and the proper procedures for such activities as begging, eating, and preaching. If a person violates them, he or she should reflect on his wrongdoing by himself. A violation of these rules is called a *duṣkṛta*, literally a "bad action." Besides bad actions, a second classification of bad speech is mentioned in many texts.

The eighth class, the *adhikaraṇa-samatha*, consists of seven rules for both monks and nuns. These rules concern the resolution of disputes within the order. Seven procedures for resolving disputes are described in the *vinaya*. When a dispute occurs, the head monk or nun should use the appropriate procedures to resolve it. If this is not done, the head monk or nun is charged with a bad action (*duṣkṛta*).

In Buddhist texts, the *pārājika*, *saṅghādisēsa*, *naihsargika-prāyaścittika*, *pāṭayantika*, and *duṣkṛta* are sometimes collectively called the five classes of offenses. If the *sthūlātyaya* (attempted) offenses and bad speech are also added to the list, they are collectively called the seven classes of offenses.

The Pāli *Vinaya* lists 227 precepts for monks and 311 for nuns. The *Dharmaguptaka vinaya*, followed in East Asia, lists 250 for monks and 348 for nuns. The numbers vary in other *vinayas*; however, the most important precepts in the various *vinayas* are the same, indicating that the rules date back to the time of Early Buddhism.⁴

Religious Life in the Saṅgha

Those who wished to enter the *saṅgha* were admitted without regard to race or social class. A man who wanted to enter the order was expected to find an experienced monk who would serve as his preceptor (*upādhyāya*) after the candidate had been accepted into the order. The preceptor prepared three robes and a begging bowl for the applicant. He then assembled an order of at least ten monks on the precepts platform and the full ordination was conferred upon the applicant.

An applicant had to satisfy certain requirements before he could join the order. A teacher (*raho'nuśāsaka ācārya*) was appointed to question the candidate about the approximately twenty conditions that could bar admission to the order. A successful candidate had to have permission from his parents, never have committed a *pārājika* offense, and not be a debtor or a criminal fleeing from the government.⁵ The monk who officiated at the ordination was called the master of ceremonies (*karma kāraṇa-ācārya*). After the ordination was completed, the new monk was instructed in the four *pārājika* rules and in the four supports (*niśraya*) for monastic life that serve as general guidelines for monks. The four supports consisted of statements by the mendicant that he would live as a monk by begging for his food, use discarded rags for robes, practice and sleep under the trees, and use the excrement of cows and discarded medicines to cure himself of illness. These were basic guidelines; additional provisions permitted exceptions to the four supports, such as accepting invitations to meals, using new clothing, living in buildings, and using medicines made from trees and roots.

After ordination, the candidate became a disciple of his preceptor. They lived together while the preceptor instructed the disciple in the precepts, doctrine, meditation, and religious austerities. If the disciple received permission from his preceptor, he might go to study meditation or doctrine under a special teacher (*ācārya*) skilled in those subjects. The disciple was expected to serve his preceptor as he would serve his own father, and the preceptor was expected to look after his disciple as he would care for his own son. They were to divide the food and clothing they received between them, care for each other when one of them was sick, and help each other with their religious practice.

The monks were ranked according to the number of years that had elapsed since their ordination. Communal life was based on seniority, and monks had to pay obeisance to those in the order with more seniority. Because monastic life was designed to enable a monk to control his desires, monks were not permitted to eat after noontime and were to shun all forms of entertainment. A typical day in a monk's life would entail rising early in the morning and meditating. The monk would go out to beg for his food later in the morning and then return to eat with the other monks before noon. Only one meal was eaten each day. In the afternoon, he could visit the houses of lay believers or go to a forest to meditate. In the evening, he might gather with other monks to discuss the Buddha's teachings or his meditations. He might also go to talk with his teachers. His life was filled with silence or with discussions of the Buddha's teachings. Later in the evening, he would withdraw to his own room to meditate. He finally went to sleep late at night. Six times

each month laymen would come to the monastery to observe the *uposatha* or "meeting days." The monks would preach Buddhist teachings to them and confer the five lay precepts. Twice each month, the monks observed *uposatha* for themselves. On the evenings of those days, the monks would gather to chant the *prātimokṣa*.

Originally, Buddhist monks were to follow a life of wandering. They were to carry only a very few items with them. Early texts specify six: three robes, a begging bowl, a cloth to sit upon, and a water strainer. The one major break in their life of wandering occurred during the rainy season. For three of the four months of the rainy season, the monks were to gather together in one place for a period of intense study and practice. At the end of this rainy season retreat, they performed a special ceremony (*pravāraṇa*) and began their life of wandering again.

Since the monks customarily made new robes or repaired their old ones after the rainy season retreat, they often decided to continue living in the same place for an additional period. The robes consisted of large pieces of cloth that were wrapped around the body. Laymen used white robes. The monks used robes dyed a dull yellow. The word for robes, *kaṣāya*, was taken from their color. They wore three robes: a lower one made of five pieces of cloth sewn together, an upper robe made of seven pieces, and a large robe made up of between nine and twenty-five pieces. The robes were usually made of cotton, but flax, silk, and wool were also used. Since a large number of pieces of cloth were required for the robes, it was not easy for the monks to assemble all the material.

Before monasteries were established at the destinations of the wandering monks, they usually slept in the open or under a tree. Since rain usually fell only during the four-month rainy season, sleeping outside did not present any problems at most times.

Some of the Buddha's disciples wished to live an even more ascetic life than the one described here. Later monks consequently compiled a list of twelve (some traditions list thirteen) rules (*dhūta*) concerning austerities. One of the Buddha's disciples, Mahākāśyapa, was particularly famous for his practice of austerities.